

Strike (Lois' POV)

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Rated: PG

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Summary: Metropolis is hosting a celebrity bowling event, but the Man of Steel has a problem — he's a terrible bowler! It all seems very familiar to Lois as she watches. Companion to Clark's POV.

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Author's Note: This plot bunny was spawned by a reveal challenge on the Lois and Clark fanfiction message boards, as issued by VirginiaR. The only real specifications were that someone's secret be revealed. This is what my twisted muse came up with.

"Yes!" Lois said, punching a fist into the air, grinning from ear-to-ear and feeling quite pleased with herself. "Take that, Kent!"

Clark rolled his eyes good-naturedly. "Must *everything* be a competition with you, Lois?"

Lois walked over to him, reluctantly putting her back to the bowling lane she and Clark were sharing. Behind her, the machine swept away the pins she'd knocked over and replaced them with a new set, ready for Clark to take his turn. She stopped a few inches from him and put her hands on her hips as Clark tallied the score. Lois glanced at the paper briefly and smiled, satisfied with the severe trouncing she was giving him.

"What?" he asked, his eyes going to where her hands rested on her hips. "Did I say something wrong?"

"You can't honestly tell me that *you*, of all people, aren't all about sports competition, Mr. College Football Player."

"Bowling is *hardly* a sport," Clark replied, chuckling and shaking his head.

"Is too!" Lois countered, baiting him. "They even televise the big competitions."

Clark shrugged. "So? I mean, do people actually *get* the stations they air on?"

"So...it's a sport," Lois said slowly, as though explaining the concept to a child, purposefully ignoring his second remark. "And a high school friend went to college on a bowling scholarship." She jerked her thumb in the direction of the waiting pins. "You're up."

Clark shook his head again, appearing to be stifling a laugh. He made his way to the ball return, selected one of the two he'd chosen for their weight and fit, and readied himself for his turn. He approached the throw line and released his grip. The ball rolled down the lane, and, for a moment, Lois thought that all looked well. Then, about halfway down the lane, it began to veer to one side. It clipped all of three pins by the time it had finished its' journey, barely knocking them down and leaving the rest standing. Clark sighed, sounding a little annoyed.

Retreating back to the ball return, he selected the spare he had and repeated the process. Immediately upon clearing the throw line, the neon blue and black ball wobbled and made a beeline for the gutter. Clark groaned as he threw his head back to look at the ceiling. Seeing his frustration, Lois couldn't help but

to feel bad for her friend and partner.

"You still aren't approaching it on the correct foot," Lois said, stepping to his side. She patted his leg briefly to show him what she meant. "You need to step off here. Then, one, two, three steps and release. Watch."

With a swish of her hair, she grabbed the swirled pink ball she had been favoring for the last game and a half. Demonstrating for Clark, she purposefully slowed down her motions before releasing the ball. It went practically screaming down the lane and knocked every pin over.

"Three in a row," she proudly crowed. "That's another little X, right here in this box," she added with a grin, pointing to the blank space on the score sheet. As soon as the words left her lips, however, she regretted them.

But she needn't have worried about Clark's feelings being hurt. As always, he seemed to remain cheerful. "Hey, thanks," Clark teased, dutifully marking the X in question. He rifled his fingers through his hair as he looked again at the chasm between his points and Lois'. "What ever would I do without you?" He tallied the score and wrote it down.

"Did I mention that the loser buys the snacks?" Lois teased back, unable to help herself, now that she knew Clark wasn't angry with the severe beating he was taking.

"I thought the winner was supposed to buy?" Clark said, grinning. "You know. Nurse my deflated ego and all."

Lois laughed as she saw sparkles dance in Clark's eyes. Now that they were friends, she'd come to love seeing the ever-present smile that he kept in those twin chocolate orbs. Now that she'd allowed herself to lose the protective cloak of her professionalism around him, she was forever doing and saying things that would make that sparkle appear, make the man's face split into the lopsided grin that had once annoyed her and now reassured her.

She was infinitely glad that Clark Kent, the nobody from Nowheresville, had become her friend. That he'd never given up on her. That he'd forced her — kicking and screaming as she'd been — to take notice of what a good and decent guy he was. That he'd refused to be put off by her sometimes acerbic nature, and had, instead, only showed her kindness and friendship.

Because, if there was one thing Lois knew for sure in her life, it was that Clark, her sometimes geeky work partner, was her best friend — the only best friend she'd ever truly known.

"You wish, Farm Boy," she said, smiling back at him, hoping to see his own again.

Clark laughed, shrugging in what appeared to be mock defeat. "Okay," he said, finally. "What do you want?"

Lois thought for a moment as she considered her choices.

"Mozzarella sticks. And a water," she finally decided on.

"Okay, I'll be right back," Clark said, before slipping away, hands in his pockets.

"Hey! It's your turn!" Lois protested as he walked toward the concession stand.

Either he didn't hear her or pretended not to. Lois sat down, waiting for his return. There was not a single thing she could do in the meantime. Until Clark took his turn, the game was at a standstill. She frowned. He'd done that on purpose, hadn't he? Probably to make some subtle point about patience. After all, he'd told her about three times on their drive over to try to relax, after she'd yelled at a few slower drivers.

She watched as Clark threaded his way through the mostly empty alley toward the concession stand. She liked the fact that the place was so empty at this time of day. It was far less noisy this way, coming in the middle of the week like they had. And with all the buzz surrounding the upcoming celebrity bowling tournament, Lois knew that all the alleys would be extra busy at night and on the past few weekends. It would have been impossible to get a lane.

She wondered if Clark attributed her sudden enthusiasm for

bowling to be just her getting caught up in the hype. The truth was, she was excited for the event. She could scarcely wait to watch Superman bowl. She'd donated a fair amount to the charity he was competing for. But that wasn't why she had the sudden urge to hit the lanes. She'd always been a decent bowler. And it just felt good to get out of the office and do something fun with Clark — something outside of their normal dinner and a movie at one or the other's apartment.

Now that she'd allowed herself to befriend Clark, she craved the moments where they could leave work behind and have some fun. Looking back over her life since college, she realized that she'd had far too little fun in those years. She shook her head. No, not since college. Probably since grade school. High school and college had been mostly about competition -with her peers, with herself, with trying to do everything and anything possible to get a leg-up. Clubs to make her seem more attractive to college recruiters. Internships to try to secure a job after college. Fun had taken a definite backseat to work. But now, with Clark, she finally felt how important it was to relax. Oh, she still considered herself to be competitive, but Clark's influence and steady infusion of fun into her life had her finally feeling like she had a real life. She felt healthier too, both mentally and physically.

She knew she was lucky to have him in her life.

"Here you go," Clark said as he returned and sat, jolting Lois out of her thoughts.

"Thanks. Looks good," Lois said, eyeing the mozzarella sticks, trying not to let on how he'd caught her off guard.

Clark grabbed up one of his nachos, dipped it in the dish of hot, gooey cheese that came with it, and popped it into his mouth. The movement seemed odd to Lois, and for a moment, she couldn't imagine why, until it finally dawned on her.

"I didn't know you ate with your left hand," Lois observed.

Clark swallowed before answering. "Sometimes, yeah." He brushed it off, as if it were nothing, which Lois supposed it was.

"How come?" It was still odd enough that she had to ask.

"I don't know," he replied casually, shrugging. "I just do, sometimes. I guess it's a habit I've had since I was a kid. I'm not even sure when it started, to be perfectly honest. Why?"

Lois shrugged in turn. She really hadn't had a good reason for asking, just her own rampant curiosity. "No reason. I just think it's interesting, that's all. Come on, it's your throw."

Clark wiped his hands on a napkin, took a sip of his soda, and stood. Lois watched as his shoulders sort of slumped as he approached the ball return. Looking like a condemned man, he dutifully picked up his bowling ball and advanced.

Lois bit back a smile as she watched his movements. They were far from graceful as he made the approach. He managed to end up on the correct foot, but, for whatever reason, the ball still wobbled as it left his hand. It hit the alley with a thud and rolled down the long length of wood before it finally knocked seven pins down.

"Nice!" Lois said, genuinely happy for him. "You did much better that time." Then, unable to resist giving him another pointer to help improve his game, she added, "But you're still not letting go at the right spot. If you'd waited another second or two as your arm came up, you would have had more control over the ball."

"Thanks. I'll keep it in mind," Clark said, smiling at her. Amazing, how he never seemed to take her criticisms as criticisms.

Lois gestured for him to try again. Clark nodded and picked up his spare ball. He repeated his actions. Again, however, he failed to release at the proper time and the ball plopped into the gutter.

"And that's the end of the game," Lois announced. "I win." She said it in a light, playful voice, doing her best not to gloat.

"No kidding," Clark said, shaking his head in an amused

manner, Lois was relieved to see. He looked briefly at the lane they were using. "If it wasn't for the gutter, I think my balls would be homeless. Err, I mean...well...you know." Immediately his face flushed in embarrassment.

Lois laughed heartily. As much as her partner could dish out the occasional double entendre, it was fun to see him inadvertently do so, thereby sticking his foot into his mouth.

Clark gestured to the lane. "Another round?" Lois thought it sounded a bit rushed and forced, as if to sweep the slip-up under the carpet as quickly as possible.

Lois nodded, giving him the reprieve he sought. "One more, I think. My arm's getting a bit tired. Isn't yours?"

"Uh, sure," Clark said, grabbing another nacho from the paper bowl on the tray. He dunked it in the cheese and ate the chip. He didn't sound all that tired though.

"Okay, five minute break," Lois announced, slipping into one of the seats, while Clark sat next to her. She grabbed one of Clark's chips and ate it plain.

"Food thief," Clark said, grinning.

He darted his hand over to Lois' mozzarella sticks. She slapped the offending hand, but not before he stole one of the sticks. Triumphant, he bit into it, appearing to be enjoying the way Lois shook her head in laughter.

"Takes one to know one, apparently," she mock-complained. She had to admit, she *did* steal food from him often enough. Far more than he did to her, at any rate.

Clark shrugged innocently and smiled. "What? It's simply a tax imposed for being the one to get the food."

Again, she laughed. God, how could it be that he so easily brought out the mirth she usually held buried deep within her? She brushed a lock of hair behind her ear as she bit into a mozzarella stick. For several long minutes, the two sat in companionable silence as they ate and drank. Finally, Lois wiped her mouth and hands on a napkin and looked back at the pins at the far end of the lane. If they were going to play another game, they'd best get started.

"Ready?" she asked Clark.

Clark wiped the grease from his fingers and took a long swig of his drink. "Ready," he nodded. "You first." He wrote their names on a fresh score sheet.

This time, Clark did much better. His score, once in the paltry double digits, soared to a respectable one hundred and twenty. Lois did her best to encourage him, cheering him on when he did well and trying to impart what tips and tricks she could when he did poorly. She didn't even fear giving away her sure-fire methods. Clark was *clearly* not cut out to be a bowler. Even if she taught him everything she knew about bowling, she doubted he would ever manage to become a real threat to her own game.

"Great game," Lois announced, flopping onto the hard plastic seat next to Clark once they were finished. She pried off one of her bowling shoes and bent to retrieve her sneakers, wiggling her toes in freedom between the change in footwear. "Looks like you finally found what works for you."

"Yeah. And thanks," Clark said, trying his shoelaces, sounding genuinely grateful to her. "You still creamed me though."

Lois shrugged. "At least you gave me a challenge, this game." She couldn't help teasing him. Their banter was a game in and of itself, as they both always tried to find ways to rib one another.

Clark laughed deeply, a soulful and wonderful sound to her ears. "Glad to be of service."

"Are you going to the celebrity tournament on Saturday?" Lois asked, trying her other shoe. She was hoping he would. It would be fun to spend the day with him.

He shook his head. "No." He sounded bored by the prospect.

"How come?"

“Standing around, watching a bunch of rich and famous people bowl?” He shrugged and stood. “It doesn’t exactly scream ‘fun way to spend my day off.’ But, let me guess. You’re going, right?”

She nodded her affirmation. “Of course. Superman will be there,” she reminded him, as if anyone could possibly forget that. Everyone in Metropolis was talking about it.

“Of course,” he said instead, his tone having an air of forced neutrality to it.

Lois tried not to roll her eyes. For someone who claimed to be Superman’s best friend, Clark often sounded jealous of — or outright bored with — the hero.

“You should come. We could hang out together. I’ll even buy the snacks this time. Besides, it’s for a good cause,” she prodded, trying to entice him.

“I know,” he nodded. “But I’ve got other plans.” He shrugged into his jacket, then helped Lois into hers. “Where to?”

Lois glanced at her watch, buying herself some time. Plans? What plans could he have? He wasn’t working. And he would have mentioned it if his folks were flying in for the weekend. Although, she supposed, he was entitled to a life outside of work and his family — and yes, even her.

“Five o’clock,” she muttered. “I don’t need to meet up with Lucy for another four hours.”

“You want to come back to my place for a while? I could run out for some Chinese food in a bit,” Clark offered.

“I’d like that,” Lois said, giving him a smile. After all, he *did* get the best takeout. “Should we pick up a movie?”

“Sure, if you’d like,” Clark said, leading her to the counter. He placed his rented shoes on the counter, pulled out his wallet, and peeled off a few bills to pay for the rounds they’d played.

“Here, let me help,” Lois said, unzipping her purse, feeling somewhat badly at the way she’d conned him into getting them some snacks earlier.

Clark waved her off as he usually did, being the polite gentleman she’d always known him to be. “My treat. Maybe I’ll let you get it next time.”

“You’re on,” she said, grinning. “Now come on, let’s get out of here.”

Saturday took too long to come, as far as Lois was concerned. The rest of the work week had been slow. With the excitement over Metropolis finally getting to host the celebrity bowling event after so many years, the police were out in full force, keeping the streets safe. Even Superman seemed to be busier than normal, helping to catch criminals almost before they could do anything. It all made for relatively little breaking news, even though she and Clark had been eyeball deep in research for a few stories they were working on. She’d barely been able to wait to have a day off, away from all her responsibilities, though the loose ends on those same stories still bothered her. But, she reasoned, she was sure to forget all about those irritating dead ends while she watched Superman bowling for charity.

She slept in, for the first time in weeks. It had felt so good, not to have to rush off any place. She could enjoy the day at her leisure.

She got dressed around noon, in her favorite pair of jeans. She debated between three tops, finally choosing a light, baby pink one. It would be warm in the bowling alley, she knew, with all of those people there. And she didn’t want to wear the Superman t-shirt she’d bought when the superhero had first burst onto the scene and literally swept her off her feet. Everyone else there would likely be sporting shirts with movie posters, sports mascots, and band logos on them to show their support for whoever they were rooting for. Lois refused to be one of the mindless fans, as she thought of them. She didn’t need to show such blatant support for Superman. If she knew him at all — and

she thought she did — he would know that she was there for him.

She picked up the phone and dialed Clark’s apartment, hoping to persuade him into accompanying her. As much as she would have loved to become Superman’s girlfriend, she wasn’t stupid. With his life, would he ever really have time to date anyone? And, while she viewed Clark as her best friend, she had to admit that it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world to wind up with someone like him. Someone she genuinely loved to be around and who always had time for her.

Well, almost always.

She listened as the phone futilely rang on and on. No one picked up. Not even the machine.

She sighed. “I guess you really *are* busy.”

The thought made her profoundly sad and lonely. She’d really hoped she could convince Clark to go with her. Watching the tournament with a friend would be infinitely more entertaining than going alone. She wondered what he could possibly be up to, and decided she would try to wheedle it out of him later that night when she would call to give him a recap of all he’d miss that afternoon.

At one o’clock, she ate a fast lunch — reheated pizza from the previous night’s research session with Clark — and headed out of her apartment to drive to the bowling alley. It was already packed when she arrived, but the vast majority of the spectators had likely used public transportation to make their way to the tournament. She was able to find a spot to park in toward the rear of the parking lot, next to an empty news van from LNN. At the doors to the building, she was nearly turned away, but she flashed her press pass at the security guards who were standing by for the protection of both the celebrity guests and the spectators alike.

Clark would have rolled his eyes at her, she knew. He probably would have commented on her lie. Well, white lie, she thought to herself. While she wasn’t there on assignment, she *was* a member of the press. As much as she enjoyed Clark’s company and the fact that he was a more-or-less perfect gentleman, sometimes his sense of morality drove her crazy. At least they didn’t get in the way of cracking stories, she reasoned.

Not long after, the first celebrities began to arrive. Lois couldn’t help it as a little thrill shot through her at seeing people she’d admired from afar. Too bad Cat Grant ruined the moment by sidling up to her.

“Looking for a date?” the older woman purred sarcastically. “You’re in the wrong place. No one here wants someone as boring as you.”

“I didn’t realize the alley allows feral animals in here,” Lois shot back.

Cat rolled her eyes. “Oh, burn,” she said in a bored, sarcastic tone.

Lois chose not to respond. She saw Jimmy not far away and, instead, went to join the photographer as he loaded a fresh roll of film into his favorite camera.

“Superman! Over here!”

It seemed that every paper, television news station, and radio station was there, all clamoring for the hero’s attention as he entered into the bowling alley. Lois wasn’t surprised in the least. The fact that Superman had agreed to participate in the day’s event was huge. So far, the man hadn’t shown much more than a somewhat stoic, semi-alloof, and professional side to most people. Lois thought that she was the one person Superman ever seemed to drop his guard around, however slightly that might have been.

Superman politely waved and dipped his head in acknowledgment, but didn’t answer any of the questions the reporters were flinging at him. Lois wondered if it was because of the level of noise in the place or because he simply had nothing to say. She watched as he went and checked in with the coordinators instead. But, as he passed her, he seemed to see her, giving her and nod and a smile as he went. She gave him a

friendly, encouraging smile in return, hoping he would notice. After checking in, the coordinators sent Superman on his way, down to the lane he'd been assigned to, where Lois imagined he would choose his bowling balls. She jockeyed for a better spot, now that she knew where her friend was going to be for the tournament.

Soon after, the rest of the celebrities began to pour into the building. Friends greeted friends. Those who didn't know one another introduced themselves. Most gravitated toward Superman, taking the time to shake his hand and exchange a few words with him. From what Lois could see, he greeted each one enthusiastically, smiling and gracefully accepting every handshake that came his way. Some he only chatted with for a moment or two. Others he talked with for a long time, becoming more animated as the time went on. Lois wondered if the Man of Steel might be a little star struck, or if he was becoming somewhat relaxed in the spirit of the games to come and beginning to open up. She wished she could join him, even if only for a moment or two, just to say hello.

Lex Luthor was there as well, making the rounds and greeting every one of the guests of honor. Like Superman, he shook every hand he came across and offered a few words to each guest. But, unlike the superhero, his posture belied the comfortable ease his mannerisms suggested. Though he smiled and appeared to laugh with some of those he spoke with, it was never for long, not the way it was with Superman at all. Lois wondered if the billionaire was simply putting on an act for the benefit of the public eye. She supposed though, that it had to be hard, maintaining a cheery and relaxed demeanor with each and every person. Lois knew what it was like to have to force on a polite and friendly facade before people she might not have otherwise liked. She did it all the time at work — in getting interviews, in gaining access to information or places she might not have been able to without the pleasant act.

She did, notice, however, how Lex stiffened up immediately upon greeting Superman. She studied both men attentively as they exchanged a handshake and a few words. Neither one looked at ease to her. Though the dislike for one another was well hidden, she knew both men well enough to know the subtleties of their body language. Lex looked more formal than usual and Superman's smile didn't reach his eyes. She doubted anyone else would notice. Not many people were privileged enough to have had one on one time with either of the men, let alone both.

Interestingly enough, she thought, Clark also hated the billionaire, though he'd never voiced it aloud. Oh, sure, he'd made his dislike of Lex known to Lois, but she could tell that his level of disdain ran deeper than he'd ever admitted to. But he seemed to seethe in the man's presence and spoke his name like a curse.

Had Superman influenced Clark's aversion to Lex? Or had Clark's mistrust and dislike of Lex colored Superman's reaction to the man?

She noticed, too, that Superman and Bruce Wayne seemed to be hitting it off. The two seemed to spend a lot of time talking with each other. And, true to her nature, Lois couldn't help but to wonder what the two men were speaking about. It was driving her crazy, not knowing.

At last, the tournament began. With each lane full of competitors, the sound level in the building quickly became deafening. Lois watched as everyone in lane twelve took their turns, but became extra attentive when Superman stepped up to take his. He strode confidently to the ball return, where his bowling balls waited. As he moved, his cape flowed out behind him, looking as regal as ever, as Lois often thought of the garment. One step. Then another. And another. Superman's arm reared back, came up, and released the ball.

Plop!

Into the gutter it went. Scattered laughter broke out among the crowd, though it sounded amused and not vicious.

Superman's head went back as he appeared to study the ceiling and groan. Funny, it wasn't unlike Clark's reaction to the gutter-balls he'd thrown when they'd bowled together, just a few days prior. Had Superman picked up the habit from Clark? Or had Clark picked it up from Superman? If either was the case, how had it come to be? When had Clark and Superman hung out together? Had they bowled together before? But, how? Superman would be recognized wherever he went. Had he gone undercover? He looked to be about Clark's height and weight, now that Lois took the time to really study him. Perhaps he'd borrowed some of Clark's clothing to pass himself off as a normal, nondescript, man.

Now, that was a thought that had never before crossed Lois' mind. Superman in normal clothing. What would he look like, dressed in jeans and a t-shirt? She tried to imagine it in her mind's eye, but had trouble seeing him in anything but the famous, tight uniform he always wore. Although, she had to admit that she wouldn't mind seeing the Man of Steel in something other than the blue suit. Not that she didn't admire how it hugged his body in all of the right places. But, maybe, just maybe, if she could be around Superman when he wasn't wearing his uniform, he would open up to her and allow her to get to know him.

Superman retreated to the ball return and picked up the spare he had waiting there. Once more, he took those three steps, brought his arm back, and released the ball. But this time, for whatever reason, he hadn't checked his strength. The ball flew down the alley and hit the pins far too hard. All ten exploded into shards and splinters of painted wood.

Superman seemed to actually blush.

"Oops," he said, sounding abashed. "Sorry."

"Judges?" one of the officials asked, looking for a ruling.

The panel of judges conferred for a moment before nodding in agreement. On the monitor above the alley, a diagonal slash appeared, flashing black before shrinking down and finding a home in the first box next to Superman's name. Lois grinned. A spare. They'd granted him a spare, even though the pins hadn't technically been knocked down.

One or two dissenters in the audience spoke up, voicing their unhappiness with the ruling.

"He didn't knock'em down!" yelled one young man, louder than all the rest. From the sound of it, he was standing behind Lois and to her left.

"The pins aren't standing either," one of the judges calmly replied with a smug smile that Lois couldn't help but to like. "Our ruling stands. Superman gets a spare. But, Superman, let's try not to destroy any more pins today. Okay?"

The superhero bobbed his head in what looked to be an embarrassed nod. "Sorry about that. It won't happen again. I promise."

"Good," the same woman said, sounding amused. She gave Superman a genuine smile.

And so the game continued. Superman managed to improve his game, though not by too much. Still, it was enough to land his score in the middle of those he was sharing the lane with. He was able to move on to the next round.

From each lane, the lowest scoring celebrities were taken out of the competition, though, from the looks of things, almost all of them stayed around to cheer on friends and colleagues. A few ducked out early, apologizing to the onlookers and citing reasons from early flights to personal reasons. Lois didn't mind. It made for less confusion in the place so that she could focus on Superman.

Those who stayed mostly sat in their same seats, cheering on the others, or wandered from lane to lane, talking to those they

knew. As before, a few approached Superman to shake his hand and to speak with him. He gracefully greeted them all, Lois noted. She did, however, regret the fact that it provided a distraction to Superman. She'd secretly hoped he'd take advantage of the brief break in the game to say hello to her.

It wasn't to be. The next round began, and all of the celebrity guests returned their attention to the wooden pins at the far end of the building. Lois watched as Bruce Wayne took his turn, knocking down an impressive nine pins with both of his throws. Then it was Superman's turn again. He picked up his neon blue ball, complete with flames on it, and contemplated it for a moment before finally approaching the throw line. Another gutter-ball. Another tossing of Superman's head back in frustration.

Lois shook her head. The motion really *did* mirror what she'd seen Clark do, time and again.

Superman took his next shot and knocked down four pins. Lois watched as Bruce Wayne's shoulders shook in a laugh she couldn't hear. As Superman sat down next to the other man, he took a fry from the basket the billionaire held toward him. Lois blinked as she watched the exchange.

Superman took the fry with his left hand and ate it.

It wasn't a surprise to her that he would eat something. Though she'd never seen the hero actually ingest anything other than a bomb or two, he had told her that he did eat. But left-handedly? That struck her as odd. She knew, with certainty, that he was right-handed. After all, he *was* throwing with his right hand. So why in the world would he eat with his left?

Suddenly, it felt like lightning struck Lois' brain. She felt her whole body go almost cold as a rush of adrenaline surged through her body.

Clark.

Clark had also eaten with his left hand while they'd been bowling, a few nights before.

Suddenly, all the similarities Lois had been noticing between Clark and Superman stopped feeling like strange, even somewhat freaky, coincidences. She thought back to what had eluded her earlier in the day. In her mind's eye, she drew glasses on Superman's face. Subtly using her hand, she blocked Superman's uniform from her sight. Sure, the hair was wrong, but...

"That *louse*," she muttered angrily as Superman's face became Clark's.

How had she never seen it before? The color of his eyes. The shape of his face. The mole above his lip. That devastating smile.

Clark Kent and Superman were one and the same.

"The liar," she growled to herself.

How could Superman lie to her? Parading around as Clark Kent, making a fool of her every day. Was he playing some kind of sick game with her? Seeing how long he could pull the wool over her eyes?

No. That wasn't right.

Lois sighed to herself.

Superman wasn't Clark. If anything, Clark was Superman. It was a subtle difference, but it meant everything.

There was simply no way that Clark Kent was Superman's cover. Clark had everything Superman didn't. He had a family. Lois had been in Smallville, in the farmhouse where he'd been raised. She knew his parents, had seen their son's baby pictures tucked neatly into albums, had looked at the photos showing Clark as he grew, hanging neatly in polished frames on the Kents' living room walls and covering their mantle. Clark had a job, an apartment, friends. He went to movies and paid his taxes. He let his passions be known — solving cases at work, favorite sports teams, helping those who couldn't help themselves, being there for his friends. He wasn't afraid to show if he was hurt, or bored, or scared, or happy, or excited.

He was everything Lois suddenly realized Superman wasn't.

Clark was *real*. Superman, by contrast, was no more than a cardboard cutout of a character.

Still...

He'd lied to Lois. Every day they had worked side by side and he'd never once mentioned his extraordinary abilities. In fact, he made himself out to be weaker than he was, less agile than he was. In all the times he and Lois had been alone together, outside of work, just two friends spending time together, he'd still never confessed to having an alternate ego, another life.

Did he think she was stupid? Did he imagine her as blind? Was he trying to see how long he could keep her in the dark? Didn't he trust her?

"No," she whispered as her mind whirred at a dizzying pace. "He does."

In an instant, a dozen moments sprang into mind. Moments where Clark had let her in to his life, had exposed his deepest feelings, had allowed her to see him at his most vulnerable. Moments where Superman had given her glimpses at the man behind the suit or had trusted her with his very life.

So why perpetuate the secret?

The crowd around her screamed in delight as Superman — or Clark, as Lois now knew with certainty — took his next turn. Women of all ages clamored for his attention, even though he was one hundred percent focused on the pins that stood waiting for him to knock down. One of the women, younger than Lois, shrugged out of her bra and tossed it in Superman's direction, though it sailed only a measly ten feet before flopping to the worn purple and gold carpet of the bowling alley.

A normal life.

Clark hadn't told her about his alter-ego because he wanted a normal life.

Shame washed over her, mixed with a healthy dose of embarrassment. How often had she utterly ignored Clark and salivated over Superman? No wonder he hadn't wanted her to know. And yet, that still didn't fully abate all of her anger that he hadn't told her. She'd been made to look like an idiot. True, she had done it to herself, but he could have at least hinted at his double life. Said something. Done something.

"He did," she whispered, her voice lost to the crowd as the next bowler took his turn.

She could remember at least three, if not more, times when Superman had told her something and Clark had repeated it in nearly the same way, and vice versa. Sometimes, it had been spoken almost word for word. And the way both of them had touched her — often little touches, but once in a while, more intimate ones. Like when he'd cupped her cheek with his hand, or the way his lips had caressed hers when he'd kissed her, even when it had been done as a ruse.

Lois sighed. She'd really made a mess of things with Clark, hadn't she?

Soon enough, Superman's — and Lois had to think of him as Superman while she processed everything that she'd figured out — poor bowling skills got him eliminated from the competition. If only he'd listened to her pointers better. She had to almost laugh aloud. Clark hadn't been joking. Bowling really *wasn't* his sport.

She watched as the lanes were condensed down as more and more bowlers were knocked out of the tournament. She'd hoped Superman — *Clark!* she reminded herself — would circulate about the room for a bit, so that maybe she could pull him off to the side, alone, and tell him that his secret was out. But, to her dismay, he remained close to lane twelve, leaning on the divider wall and continuing to keep up a conversation with Bruce Wayne. And, from the look of things, continuing to help himself to the man's fries. That made her smile, despite her lingering anger over his deception.

Without Superman as a contestant, the rest of the tournament

seemed to drag on forever. But, at long last, a winner was announced. Lois didn't care who won. She barely knew who was even left in the competition, let alone paid much attention to the scores. She wanted answers from Clark, and wanted them *now*. But even *that* was denied to her, as the remaining celebrities were pulled off to the side to sign a number of items for an additional fundraising auction. Clark dutifully signed everything that was pushed at him, while he smiled and kept up a steady conversation with those around him.

Of course, the auction wasn't really a surprise. It had been touted as one of the tournament's highlights — a chance to own an authentic autograph from your favorite star! Lois had earmarked some money for the cause, despite the repair bill she'd recently had for her Jeep — replacing the tires and fixing the worn out brakes. She knew she didn't *have* to bid on a Superman-signed item. She was sure that if she merely asked him, he would sign whatever she wanted. After all, they *were* pretty good friends. No, she had planned to bid on an item to own something he'd signed *and* help out his charity in the same stroke. She watched as he put his signature on a plush Superman doll, which, before her revelations that day, Lois might have been interested in bidding on. Now though, she kept her eyes on Clark, watching to ensure that he didn't try to duck out early.

He wasn't leaving the tournament without knowing that she'd figured him out.

At long last, the last piece of frivolous signed pictures had been auctioned off and the lucky winner declared. The celebrities began to leave. And, foremost among them, strode Superman in all of his blue and red clad glory. Even through her hurt that Clark hadn't been completely honest with her, Lois still couldn't deny that there was something magnificent about the way Clark held himself when he was playing the part of the dashing superhero. She hustled to get ahead of the crowd, so that she could be one of the first out the door and waiting for Clark in the parking lot.

She'd be damned if she let him fly off without getting a word in with him.

Several people cursed her as she jostled past. Lois barely heard them. In fact, she shot choice words at only one particularly loud and filthy-mouthed man — and that was only because he'd had the audacity to grab at her arm. Truth be told, Lois was proud of herself for not decking the man in the face. But that would only delay her, as she was sure the security guards and police officers present would have been on her in a second. And that simply would not have flown with her. So she continued to block out the yells of the fans clogging the lobby and managed to squeeze out of the front doors before Clark could reach them.

Most of the media personalities had already moved their operations to the parking lot, ahead of Lois. She wasn't surprised. Had she been attempting to snag an interview with one of the celebrities, she would have done the same thing. She saw that Cat was already there, filing her claws as she waited to pounce on the unsuspecting guests.

"Superman!" she called out as soon as Clark emerged from the building.

Lois saw his eyes immediately swivel to their co-worker. He had a smile on his face, but he also looked kind of tired. Lois imagined that the noise level in the building must have taken its toll on his sensitive hearing. Too bad he was going to get an earful from her as soon as they could be in the privacy of his own apartment.

That stopped her in her tracks. Why had she immediately thought of going to his apartment, not hers? Maybe some part of her felt badly enough that she was willing to allow him to explain himself in the place where he was most comfortable. Perhaps being at his place would allow her to finally, fully, merge the two men in her mind — her best friend and her hero. Or maybe some

part of her didn't trust that he would show up to her place, even though she knew that Clark was a man of his word, and if he said he would meet her there, he would.

"Superman!" Cat called again. "Can you comment on your bowling scores today?"

"I'm just glad I was able to participate," he said vaguely. How often had Superman given vague answers like that? And now, Lois knew why. "It was a great event for a great cause. I'm very happy with the amount of money we were all able to raise for all those charities today."

"But what about your scores themselves?" the woman pressed. "It seems like you aren't too familiar with bowling."

"I'm familiar enough with it," he said, shrugging. "I guess it's just not really my game though. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

With that, he swept passed her, taking long strides out into the cracked and uneven parking lot that stretched from the bowling alley to the corner of the street. Lois immediately moved to shadow him, quickening her pace to keep up with his purposeful strides.

"Superman?" Lois called out. "A moment?" She had intended to get a little further from the crowd, but she was afraid he might fly off.

"Hi, Lois," he said, stopping and turning to her.

"Hi, yourself," she said, reaching his side. She gestured away from the crowd. "Can we talk for a minute?"

"Sure," Clark said.

Lois started to walk away without another word, with Clark following just a step or two behind. She almost felt bad for him. He had no idea what was coming, that his cover was blown — at least, it was with her. *Almost*.

"Lois?" he ventured after they'd gone a few feet.

"Just a second," she replied. "I'd rather speak in private."

"Uh, sure," Clark said, and she couldn't miss the hint of confusion in his words.

After another minute, Lois paused. They were at her Jeep, so she crossed her arms and leaned against her rear bumper. For a moment, all she did was look at him, deciding how best to break the news to him.

"Is something the matter?" he asked gently, and she realized, belatedly, how serious she must have looked.

"You tell me, *Clark*. What could *possibly* be wrong? Other than you lying to me since the moment I met you." He went to speak, but she cut him off. "No, I don't want to hear it right now. I'll meet you back at your apartment and you'd *better* explain yourself. And Kent, don't you *dare* even think about faking an emergency." She did her best to keep her voice low.

Clark paled and his mouth hung slack. Lois saw his eyes dart around, checking the area to see if anyone was in earshot. But, of course, there was no one. Lois had made sure of that as she'd led him to her Jeep. But even after reassuring himself, he looked panicked, though he slowly nodded.

Good, Lois thought. Let him worry for a bit. While she would never use his secret against him, and although she was only slightly still angry with him, he could ponder how she would react when they were alone. After all, turn about was far play.

He turned from her and silently started to rise into the air. Lois sighed. No, she couldn't let him worry too much. Not now. Not when he looked like he thought she might hate him forever.

"Clark," she said softly.

He paused, but didn't look at her.

"If you'd told me before...I could have helped you improve your game more," she teased.

She could almost see the smile on his face as he chuckled and flew off.

THE END